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ABSTRACT

Writing and speaking are so closely integrated that educators can no longer continue to isolate them for separate study. Students can benefit from the teaching of writing and speaking simultaneously in that they learn to develop personal expression in more than one medium and gain a sense of immediate feedback. By recognizing that meaning implies the total context of the speaker, message, audience, and nonverbal factors, students are able to clarify their written communication, knowing that they must point out the pattern of their thoughts to their readers. While teachers demand that technical writing students consider the background and knowledge of their audience to connect with that audience, they give students few specific instructions on how to accomplish this. The audience in a speech class can give these students the feedback that allows them to design their material for a particular situation. For a class of remedial students, speaking the writing assignment aloud can become a major break-through in improving writing skills. While this combined approach will not work in all kinds of teaching situations, such as in larger classes or with excellent writers who are poor speakers, communication in the 1980s will require that the speaker's voice be put back into writing. (HTH)

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CS207 229

SPEAK AND WRITE: WRITE AND SPEAK

THE VALUE OF A COMBINED APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Have you ever tried to explain to a student why no one would understand what he has written, although he claims he understands it perfectly? Or begun a unit on job search, including how to take an interview, and wondered how you could help students coordinate the resume with the oral performance? Or wondered how you could bring a class in report writing within human focus? Or simply despaired of the gobbledygook that pervades our culture?

Writing and speaking are so closely integrated that we can no longer continue to isolate them for separate study. Moreover, there is an urgent need to make everyday language more meaningful. Plain English please is the title of a textbook[1] and the catch phrase for a social awareness that dates back to Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass in which he uses fantasy as a means of attacking the language of history texts and committee rooms. Alice receives instruction in showing consideration for the feelings of others and in speaking up for her rights as an individual. In chapter three of Alice in Wonderland, called "A Caucus Race and a Long Tale," the Dodo bird rises solemnly to his feet and addresses Alice: "'I move that the meeting adjourn, for the adoption of more energetic remedies--.'"[2] To which the Eaglet replies: "' Speak English! . . . I don't know

the meaning of half those long words, and what's more, I don't believe you do either.'"[3] The Eaglet's remark could be interpreted in various ways: don't contaminate the purity of the English language; don't try to force me to accept your elitist, upper class superiority; or, perhaps more cogently, don't expect me, a child to cringe before my elders. In any case, the Eaglet is rather self-conscious but delighted with the effect of his words: "And the Eaglet bent down its head to hide a smile: some of the other birds tittered audibly.'"[4] This situation in Alice in Wonderland illustrates a basic assumption in communication: language becomes meaningful according to a social situation, and the speaker is aware of his words as he contemplates and perceives their effect on others.

Recognizing that oral communication is subject to the same abuses as writing, and that the public speaking occasion can lead to pompous egotism, I believe, nevertheless, that we need to get the speaker's voice back into writing. After several years of trying to teach students to use the dialectic order of presenting arguments (advocated in Sheridan Baker's otherwise excellent text, The Practical Stylist), I became determined to try another approach. And too, I was frustrated by my own inability to write as effectively as I believed I could speak. I wanted to teach students to write in a way which could get the vitality and flexibility, the directness, of the speaker's voice onto the written page. Journalism students are taught to write for the ear; why not try some of that in my communications course? That is basically the origin of my involvement in an approach that demands a constant alternation between writing and speaking.

What is the value of teaching writing and speaking simultaneously? I believe there are two ways in which students benefit enormously from the combined approach to communication skills. First of all, they learn to develop personal expression in more than one medium. After all, writing in sentences and paragraphs is only one medium of communication with others. In fact, oral communication is probably far more important to most individuals than writing. Secondly, as well as learning two ways of communication, they also gain a sense of immediate audience feedback. In order to use the written assignment as a speech, they must plan to assess their audience. To succeed as speakers and writers, students perceive the need for audience analysis; they begin at once to communicate with a purpose in mind.

Teaching students to link written and oral communication begins with a summary of the essential similarities and differences between the two. In both, you are aiming toward structured communication, and so, you delete material that is irrelevant to your major idea. First you must organize your material; second, you must plan effective introductions and conclusions; and third, you must develop your thoughts carefully. This is the same for both speaking and writing, although it is true that in speaking the sender of the message is more likely to reveal the bare bones of his organizational structure than is the writer.

Other differences between writing and speaking are more striking. In writing you have a different time sense from speaking because the reader can ponder the meaning of the words, reviewing any set text a number of times, and the writer can revise constantly to explore the

range of possibilites implied in the words. In extemporaneous speaking, on the other hand, you must think and communicate instantaneously; granted that you have planned your organization and your major ideas, but in live performance you find your words as you relate to your audience. Written material has punctuation marks, paragraph indentations, and chapter endings to mark pauses and emphasis; spoken communication, however, depends upon the speaker's ability to use voice and gestures to emphasize meaning.

MEANING! At this point, we may be jumping too far ahead of the language I have been using. What is meaning? The Mad Hatter's tea party illustrates the dilemma. When Alice receives advice on how she should use words and conduct herself decorously, she tries to relate it to her personal experience, and usually ends up confused. The March Hare insists: "'You should say what you mean . . . .'"[5] Because Alice is confused by this instruction, she falters: "'I do,' Alice hastily replied; 'at least--at least I mean what I say--that's the same thing you know.'"[6] Getting the message across as you intend it is not the same thing as being sincere. In Alice in Wonderland the reader is not told whether Alice learns this lesson but at the end of the tea party episode Alice discovers the entrance to the garden she has earnestly sought, and so the reader may infer that she makes a big step forward in understanding.

Similarly, in a writing class students often confuse their intention to say one thing with the message which their audience receives. In the speech class, however, they grasp the nature of the intentional fallacy instantly because they recognize that oral

communication meaning implies the total context of speaker, message, and audience. Students perceive also that non-verbal factors are enormously important. Having recognized these facts, and having experienced them as speakers and as listeners in a classroom environment, they return to their writing with a different perspective. They appreciate that the message is the message received, not just what you intend to say but what the reader actually picks up. In this way, they clarify their written communication, knowing that they must point out the pattern of their thoughts to their readers.

To be sure, in a successful writing class, group analysis can take the place of public speaking in that students respond verbally to each other's writing. Each student could read his essay or report aloud- distributing visuals as illustration (if they are part of the assignment). Nevertheless, many classes do not respond well to peer evaluation of this kind, either through sensitivity to criticism or through lack of articulate insight. In a speech class students perceive more overtly, even without being told, why some communication is effective and some is not. Despite initial nervousness in public performance, many participants in such a program find the speech class more lively and more interesting than the writing class because speaking is easier than writing and because progress is faster and more easily discernable.

In the development of a child, early speech patterns affect acquisition of reading and writing skills. If ~~the instructor can assist~~ students ~~in~~ can eliminat~~ing~~e cliches and jargon, and even vulgarity, from their oral language, then ~~he or she has~~ they have a good basis for dealing with the selection of words and phrases in establishing shades of meaning

in writing. Moreover, ~~the~~ students in a speech class ~~is~~ are already familiar with the importance of tone and emphasis before the more difficult task of achieving those effects in writing.

One of the drawbacks to successful writing for many students in the first year of a community college program is lack of mature self-control. They have difficulty in sustained control of thought and emotion. This is where the format of a speech class is useful. Students practice the read speech and the extemporaneous formats; they also participate in numerous rounds of impromptus. The value of these impromptus is twofold: they are forced to organize their thoughts quickly and so leap ahead of the conscious restraint that censors performance and disrupts creativity; and, too, they discover that they have ideas and interests that they were not previously aware of. The impromptu routine forces participants to consider new ideas, to round off the topic, and then to sit down! Having established self-control and self-confidence in giving a short talk before their classmates, they are ready to take the same material and shape it in the more lasting form of an essay or a report. Because they appreciate the value and satisfaction of all communication, they are more motivated to write.

The big advantage to learning to write as you learn to speak is that your have explored your own mind. Studies in the relationship between fiction and subconscious have shown that readers find fulfillment in the sense of a secure, orderly world in fiction. I think this is also true of other kinds of writers and speakers; both the sender and

the receiver experience the fulfillment of the orderly world of art. In a sense, I am assuming that oral communication is an art form and that we are all life artists as we create patterns in our experience.

But what about the relationship between speaking as an art form and specialized writing such as technical reports? Actually, relating technical writing to technical speaking is easy because students in community colleges will want to use material from their own technology. As Barry Turner points out in his text Effective Technical Writing and Speaking, "After all technical people are on the whole better informed about the material world than most of the population. They need not be afraid of having nothing of interest to say."[7] In both technical speaking and writing, students are presenting facts; their key problem is how to reduce masses of information to clear, emphatic formats. In this situation the instructor can move in one of two directions: from the written report to the oral presentation, including visuals, or from the talk back to the written page, with the hope that the student will incorporate some of the important aspects of audience feedback. A question and answer period after the speech allows the student to assess how well the audience will comprehend the material he or she is trying to convey. In this way, if students begin with the oral presentation, then already they have an outline of points to be developed in the report; they can provide for themselves the critical insight and self-analysis which leads to good report writing.

Public speaking forces students to visualize their ideas in a way which is directly applicable to technical writing. For example, in outlining the reasons why speaking without notes can help the

performer, Canadian journalist Keith Spicer (Winning It) tells us to imagine a teleprompter in front of us. He deals with speech planning as a three part structure: simplify, illuminate, advance.[8] Other techniques for speech writing, such as stating the problem and outlining the possible solutions, also fit the report formats which we explore in a class in technical writing. The basic need to make the message absolutely clear to an immediate audience will force the writer to consider the same concise pattern for organizing material in a report. Furthermore, speaking without notes can train the writer in the skill of emphatic communication.

We demand of our technical writing students that they consider the background and knowledge of their audience, and that they make a huge effort to connect with that audience. And yet we give them few specific instructions on how to accomplish that seemingly impossible task. Louise Rorabacher's commonly used book Patterns of Exposition begins by exhorting student writers to remember their readers: "Write as though you were a professional obliged to sell your work to the public. Write for your classmates, your college group, your family or neighbors--in other words, for 'general readers,' those lay people on whose education and intelligence you can rely but who are in no sense specialists in your subject. "[9] I agree with this statement, but I also recognize that this is a difficult task for the beginning writer, especially one who is unsure about his knowledge. On the other hand, the speech class provides a real life situation so that the instructor does not have to invent role-playing exercises to force students to consider a potential group of readers. The audience in the speech class gives students the reassuring echo that allows them

to design their material for a particular situation.

Remedial students, especially, benefit from the speech class as a way of improving self-image. For these students, there are two evident obstacles to communication: first of all, lack of empathy with others, and secondly, and more importantly, lack of self-confidence. In order to perform as speakers, they must stop thinking about themselves and their inadequacies; losing the sense of self-conscious fear represents a huge step forward in gaining the kind of assertive confidence which is important in writing. For a class of remedial students, speaking the writing assignment aloud can become a major break-through in improving writing skills.

I am not suggesting, however, that this combined approach works in all kinds of teaching situations. For example, in a large group of thirty or more students, it would be difficult to allow each participant time to give an oral presentation. I admit, moreover, that there are problems in overall student assessment. What do you do about the students who do extremely well in writing but not in speaking? What kind of grade do you give the student who moves ahead quickly in speaking but lags behind in writing? Should the writing part of the course be weighed more heavily? Inevitably, the instructor must be well organized in order to integrate the speaking and writing assignments so that one does not contradict the other; so also the instructor must give a grade at the end of the course that represents the total public image which the student presents. Other problems include the following: There is a difference in rhetorical style between written and oral communication so that students may become confused about when to use the pronoun I; Overconfidence in one area may cause students to undervalue

the importance of the other; finally, being a good writer does not always lead to success in the performance of public speaking. Despite these difficulties, I maintain that developing communication skills depends upon audience awareness. Writing and speaking are equally important in the process of becoming articulate. The Duchess seems to say something of this when she tells Alice: "'Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves.'"[10]

How we should now, in the 1980's, teach people to become articulate is an open question; there is not one answer but a variety of possibilities. In the immediate past, the ways in which we have used to teach people to write have led to a rigid, artificial and even mechanical style. We need to get the speaker's voice back into our writing. By that I mean not the anonymous voice of the committee room but the vitality of the individual. It would be impossible to overstate the importance of teaching communication skills for the future of our race may well depend on how well the individual can assert in verbal and written form his belief in the value of human consciousness.

Notes

[1]Gregory Cowan and Elisabeth McPherson, Plain English Please (New York: Random House, 1966).

[2]Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass (Kingsport, Tenn.: Grosset and Dunlap, 1946), p.24.

[3]Lewis Carroll, p. 25.

[4]Lewis Carroll, p. 25.

[5]Lewis Carroll, p. 73.

[6]Lewis Carroll, p. 73.

[7]Barry T. Turner, Effective Technical Writing and Speaking (London: Business Books, 1974), p. 85.

[8]Keith Spicer, Winging It (Toronto: Doubleday, 1982), p.24.

[9]Louise E. Rorabacher and Georgia Dunbar, Assignments in Exposition (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 6th ed., p. 5.

[10]Lewis Carroll, p. 98.